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# THE HISTORY OF WOOD-ENGRAVING IN AMERICA.

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## CHAPTER VIII.



Y age Mr. Marsh is anterior to the "New School." Yet, with genius that should have taken him elsewhere, he has led to it and leans toward it. He has been handicapped by his entomology. Artist in feeling, and capable engraver as he is, yet—

Let him handle his graver wherever he will,  
The butterfly shadow hangs over it still.

I have already done homage to his incomparable insect work. He stands, with all his talent, as a warning against mannerism: though in fairness it must be said that the greatness of his mannerism was thrust upon him, and was not only excusable, but justified by necessity. But the law of consequence halts not for justifications. His one solitary exception to the prevailing manner, so far as my knowledge goes, (and I needed proof to convince me it was his,) was the *Robinson Crusoe* given at page 336. I gave it to show what he might have done had not his course continued from beetles to La Farge, from La Farge to beetles again. "Nous revenons toujours à nos premiers amours." Mr. La Farge's drawings (I speak here only of his manner of placing upon the wood his most imaginative designs) were most unfortunate practice for Mr. Marsh. The broadest Nast drawings, to correct his tendency to subtlety and over-refinement, had been better for him. "No more minuteness" should have been his motto: instead of which, his reverence for the higher qualities of La Farge's work made him the slave of all its deficiencies in execution. Those Riverside drawings,—the *Wolf-Charmer* and others of that La Farge series,—original, labored, and suggestive, were yet of real detriment to the engraver. They, rather than the insects, may be considered the beginning of the "New School." He builded worse than he knew. Submissive toward his artist, painfully conscientious in his work, there is yet nothing in them to be valued by an engraver. Four other drawings by La Farge for *Songs of the Old Dramatists* (Hurd & Houghton, 1873) have the same conditions. The one here given is, I think, the best specimen we have of Marsh's talent, great, but belittled. See how daintily he has treated the figure, how full of delicacy and feeling is the principal flower. But the figure does not float over the stream,—it sticks against the unreceding water; and the distant leaves and flowers are as close to you as is the foreground. It is the same in everything. There is no distance. Beetle or butterfly texture always, and generally confusion. *A Simple Fireplace* (F. Lathrop), *Aloft on the Glittering Shield* (Mrs. Foote), *Little Sigrid* (John La Farge), *Still Life, Study in Oil* (R. S. Gifford),—all remind us of the *Insects injurious to Vegetation*. In the *Still Life* we are in doubt as to what is flat and what in relief, and whether the vase holds feathers, or flowers, or both, so confused are the over-labored textures. Of course he is perfect in an *Etruscan Fan* of feathers, and a little bas-relief of *The Author of Home, Sweet Home*, is very pure and charming. For all these I refer my readers to the *Portfolio of Proofs*,



ENGRAVED BY HENRY MARSH.—DRAWN BY JOHN LA FARGE.

From "Songs of the Old Dramatists." Published by Hurd & Houghton.

rather than to the pages of *Scribner's Monthly*, that my strictures may not be laid to the charge of any inferior printing. I have, perhaps, been severe on Mr. Marsh's short-comings, but surely not from any personal prejudice. There is an important question involved in the differences I am noticing,—a question of truth or falsehood in work, a question be it only said of better or worse in the methods of engraving, which I am endeavoring to bring out and clearly to explain. It is an important part of the History of Wood-Engraving in America.

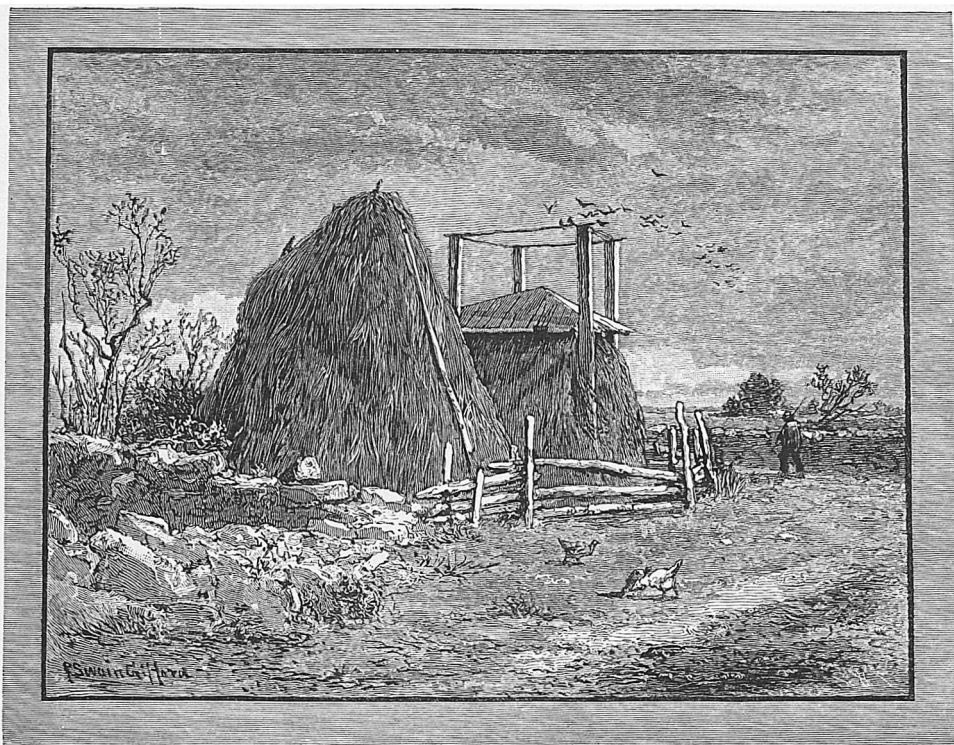
A bold double-page cut, before referred to, by J. G. Smithwick, from as bold a drawing by Reinhart, will repay the trouble of looking to pp. 88, 89, of *Harper's Weekly Journal* for 1877 (Vol. XXI. No. 1049). It is a daring piece of genuine white-line work, in which, with no lack of self-assertion on the part of the engraver, the drawing and manner of the draughtsman have been fairly reproduced. It is as bold (coarse would not be the right word for it) as Anderson's boldest, and truly in the style of Bewick, if with less determined drawing. It is this larger work which shows the engraver's power. Where excessive fineness comes in there is but little room for distinguishing manipulation. Matters not, the workman may say, what lines come here; they will be too fine to be noticed. So he fills in his space, as he might if he had a stencil-plate, with anything; and it passes if he but keep the color. Looking at this Smithwick engraving, one wishes the engraver might always find employment on this larger scale. He has, however, admirably adapted himself to the smaller needs of book and magazine work. Good cuts by him will be found in *Harper's Monthly* for 1878-79, one very good, after Miss Jessie Curtis (Vol. LVII. p. 805). At p. 816, Vol. LVIII., he has dropped into the cross-line inanity, where I should be loath to leave him. He is too strong to linger among the handmaids of Omphale. Reynolds's *Strawberry Girl* (*St. Nicholas*, Vol. III. p. 345) and *Miss Penelope Boothby*, the frontispiece to the same volume, (both also in the *Portfolio*,) show him in his manlier style. Another work of his I would particularize is the *Adoration of the Cross* (*Harper's Monthly*, Vol. LVIII. p. 672, *Art in America*, p. 160), drawn by Snyder, after St. Gaudens, the same subject and of the same size as Mr. Cole's, remarkably like that in treatment, and equally good. A *Haystack*, after Swain Gifford (*Scribner* for 1878, Vol. XVI. p. 516), and a *Little Cove at Nassau* (Vol. XV. p. 28), are fair specimens of his ability in landscape; and of his small figures I may choose for praise his copy of the *Surprise*, after Sidney Mount (*Harper's Monthly*, Vol. LIX. p. 251, and *Art in America*, p. 55). His figures are generally good. *Flags, eh?* (*Harper's Monthly* for July, 1880) is a fair example. But what does he mean by that mass of net-work under the horse and cart? It makes a positive substance of the shadow, the end of

it sticking to the dog's head. A little clean outlining (too much neglected under the stencil system) would have prevented other near and remote parts of the cut from sticking together. And what is the use or beauty of that ridiculous cross white line in the ground?

I have spoken only of Mr. Smithwick; but Mr. French's name should be coupled with his partner's in many, if not in all, of the works I

have here noticed. The double-page cut in *Harper's Weekly* is, I suppose, by Mr. Smithwick only.

Mr. F. S. King seems to have an affection for birds and fish, as well as for landscapes, though he is able also in figures. *On the Edge of the Orchard*, by Swain Gifford (Scribner, Vol. XVI. p. 513), is thoroughly good. So also is the *Sea Raven and Toad-Fish*, by J. C. Beard (Vol. XIII. p. 589). *The Birthplace of John Howard Payne* (Vol. XVII. p. 472), "from a charcoal drawing," carefully labored, has the look of a poor lithograph or process "engraving." The *Bobolink*, an earlier work (Vol. XII. p. 488), is bright and excellently cut. Mr. King knows how to



THE HAYSTACK.

ENGRAVED BY SMITHWICK & FRENCH.—DRAWN BY R. SWAIN GIFFORD.

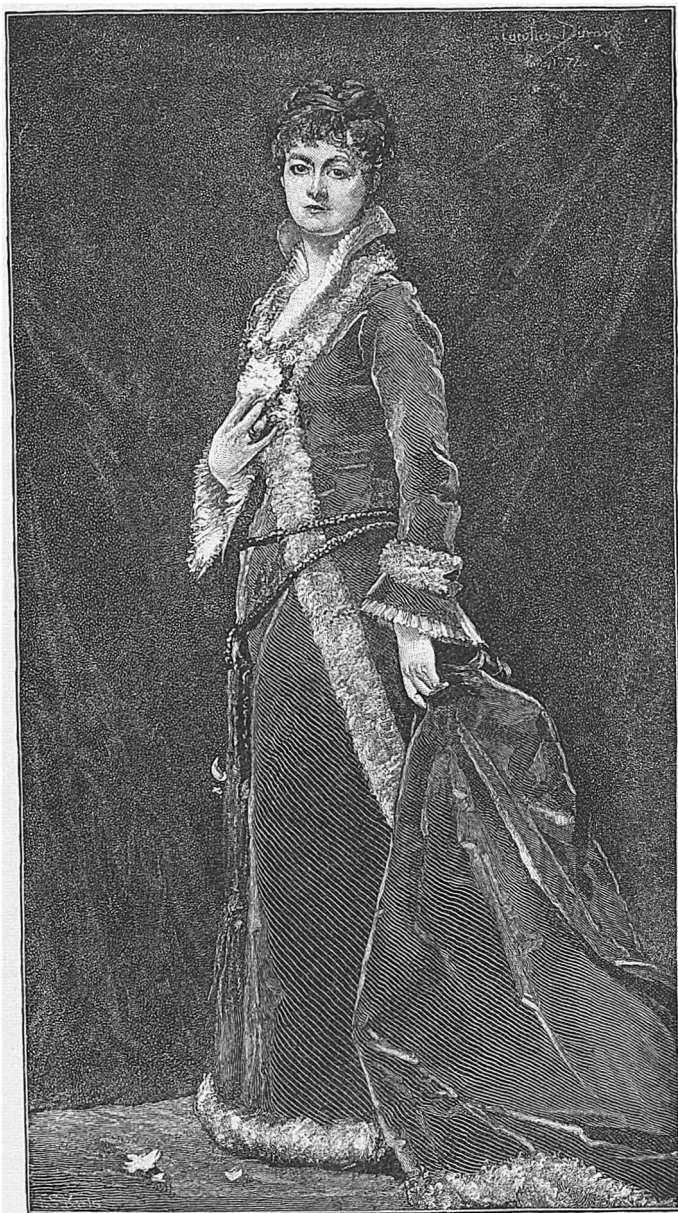
From "Scribner's Monthly Magazine."



FLAGS, EH?

ENGRAVED BY SMITHWICK & FRENCH.—DRAWN BY A. B. FROST.

From "Harper's Monthly Magazine."



MODJESKA.

ENGRAVED BY F. S. KING, AFTER CAROLUS DURAN.

From "Scribner's Monthly Magazine."

between the butterfly texture and the texture of the flowers. Mr. King's tints, whether of sky or of ground or water, are full of tone, pure in line, and sweet in gradation. I would praise especially a cut in *Harper's Monthly* for 1879 (Vol. LIX. p. 13), a ghostly figure by Abbey, exceedingly fine in cutting, the flesh nicely stippled, the gauzy drapery well rendered, and the color, ranging from solid black to the positive white of the lightning, excellently emphasized and gradated: the whole very painter-like and effective. And yet one more must not pass unnoticed,—the *Falls of the Blackwater* (*Harper's Monthly* for July, 1880, p. 181), than which I know of nothing more truly refined, more pure and delicate. I only quarrel with fine work when it has nothing but fineness to recommend it. Fine as this cut is, the graver drawing is good throughout.

Mr. Hoskin's landscapes have the same delicately discriminating quality as those by Messrs. King and Smithwick & French. I know his work only in *Harper's Monthly*, and in the reprint, *Art in America*. The cut I have given at page 438 is a fair specimen of his ability. *On the*

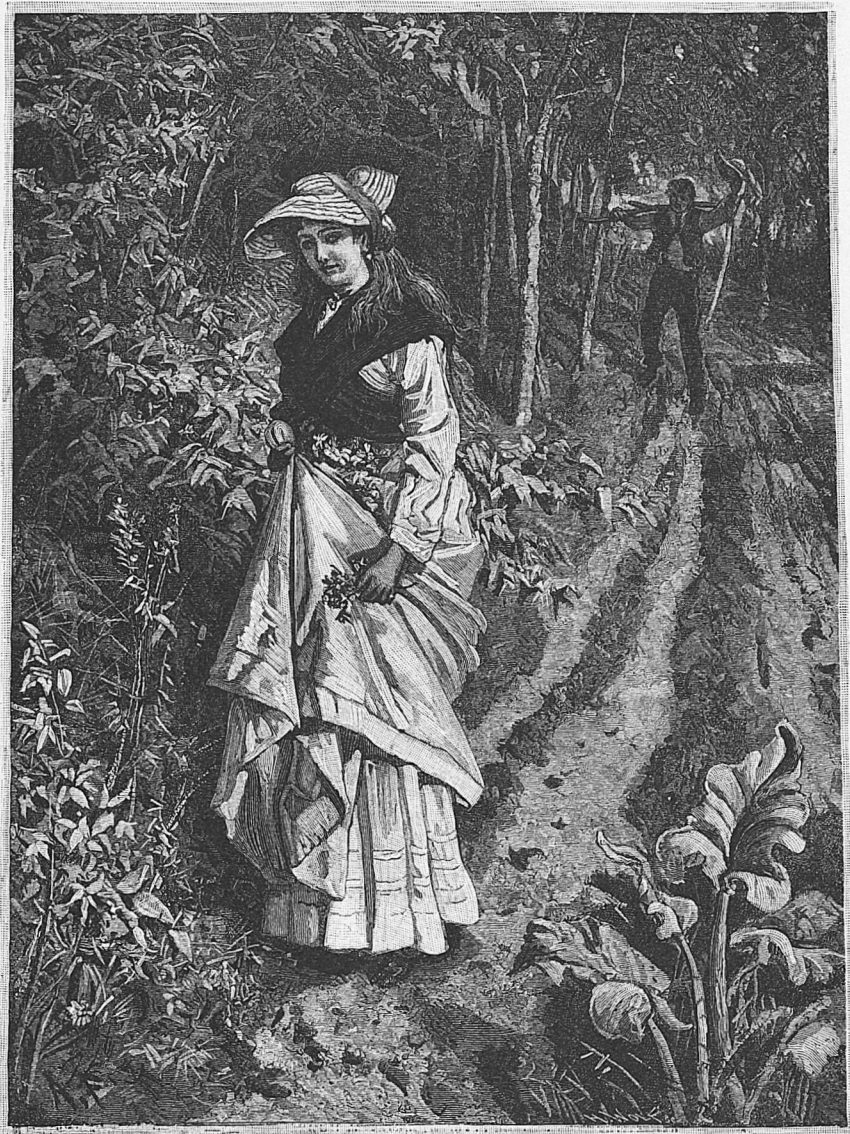
give value to his blacks; for which I may refer also to the *Plaza at Retaluleu* (Vol. XV. p. 621). The *Return from the Deer Hunt* (Vol. XIV. p. 519) and *Morning at Fesse Conkling's* (Vol. XVII. p. 460) are as good specimens of fine landscape engraving as I have seen anywhere. The first, a snow scene, is very striking; the figures in it are also well cut. The same may be said of the figures in *Snowballing* (Vol. XVII. p. 39). *Snow Buntings*, by Miss Bridges (Vol. XII. p. 485), another snow scene, is equally good, and for difference of style may be contrasted with Marsh's *Humming Birds*, by Riordan (Vol. XVII. p. 161),—the difference between clearness and bewilderment,—perhaps in some measure owing to the drawing. All these engravings by Mr. King will be found in the *Portfolio of Proofs*. I refer also to the magazine for the benefit of those who have not the proofs; also because the magazine references show the order of time in which the works were done. Other notably good works by the same hand are the *Modjeska*, after Duran (*Scribner*, Vol. XVII. p. 668), as good in its way, if not so important an engraving, as Mr. Cole's *Modjeska*, at p. 470, with which it may be well to compare it; and a marvellously elaborated *Peacock's Feather* (*Harper's Monthly*, Vol. LVII. p. 384, 1878), capitally drawn by W. H. Gibson, a cut altogether worthy of Marsh. *Butterflies* (Vol. LIX. p. 385), by the same artist, do not equal those by Marsh, but are good, though the cut is spoiled for want of distinction



*Kern River* (*Art in America*, p. 99) is very good: the line firm, with excellent gradation and tone. Other of his work I may conveniently notice in the number of *Harper's Monthly* for September, 1879 (three cuts at pp. 484, 485, and 487). That after Casilear is of his best, not bettered by those useless perpendiculars again in the sky; the Hubbard is weak, yet more weakened by still worse perpendicularity; and in the *Sunset on the Hudson*, Sanford R. Gifford, what might have been an excellent piece of tone is spoiled by the same lazy offensiveness. I say lazy, because it seems to me that much of this cross-lining is done only to save the trouble of considering direction of lines in the first place, or of thinning too thick lines when the effect requires that. I set it down as generally a mere trick of laziness. I make amends to Mr. Hoskin for this remark, by no means aimed personally at him,

by calling attention to another of his works, the *Old Mill* (*Harper's Monthly* for July, 1880, p. 174), to which, save for still a slight glimpse of my perpendicular *bête noire*, I am happy to give unstinted praise. I find that I have picked out three cuts from that last July number of *Harper* for especial commendation. There is, indeed, a remarkable amount of good work in it, as there is in most of the later numbers of the magazine,—one especially good, *The Errand*, by Johnson (p. 52, June, 1880),—mixed unfortunately with much that is poor or bad. Is there no such monster as an editor with pictorial judgment?

Mr. Wolf is not to be overlooked, but I must now be content with choosing a few cuts indicative of the engraver's ability. He answers to the roll-call of the New School, and what I have already given of that may suffice without much further illustration. *The Mowing* (*Harper's Monthly*, July, 1879, *Art in America*, p. 165), though over-elaborated [there was no occasion for the cross-threads on the girl's dress, and her face and some of the herbage are of the same fabric], is else a good cut. *The Start Viva* (*Scribner*, Vol. XVII. p. 713) is not without merit: but why (I am always on the same quest) are distant wall, flat ground, drapery, dust, and horse-hair all apparently worked in cross-stitch? *Seeking Pasturage* (Vol. XVII. p. 480) has



THE MOWING.

ENGRAVED BY H. WOLF.—DRAWN BY ALFRED FREDERICKS.

From "Art in America," by S. G. W. Benjamin. Published by Harper &amp; Brothers.



THE START VIVA.

ENGRAVED BY H. WOLF.—DRAWN BY G. INNESS, JR.

From "Scribner's Monthly Magazine."

good graver work in it. Is it the draughtsman's fancy that the starved sheep are all woolless? I guess it is but another case of the perhaps artistic engraver sacrificed to the unartistic idleness or incapacity of his draughtsman. Much cry on the designer's part, but no wool! These two cuts will be found also in the *Portfolio*. A very noticeable Wolf will be found in *Scribner* for May, 1880 (p. 5), *Feeding the Pigeons*, after Walter Shirlaw. The cut is very delicately gray, with fine accentuation of the blacks in the pigeons. But everything is flat, without distance or definition of form. Patches of the girl's dress, her cap, her face, distant wall, pigeons' backs,—all are of the same material. Look also (in the same number, p. 7) at *Oyster Gatherers*. The sky may be torn sail-cloth, or blocks of ice, or bad wood-carving: there

is not even the shape of cloud. Supposing this to be the painter's whim, one does not the less feel it to be a degradation that for any reason whatever an engraver should be compelled to repeat it.

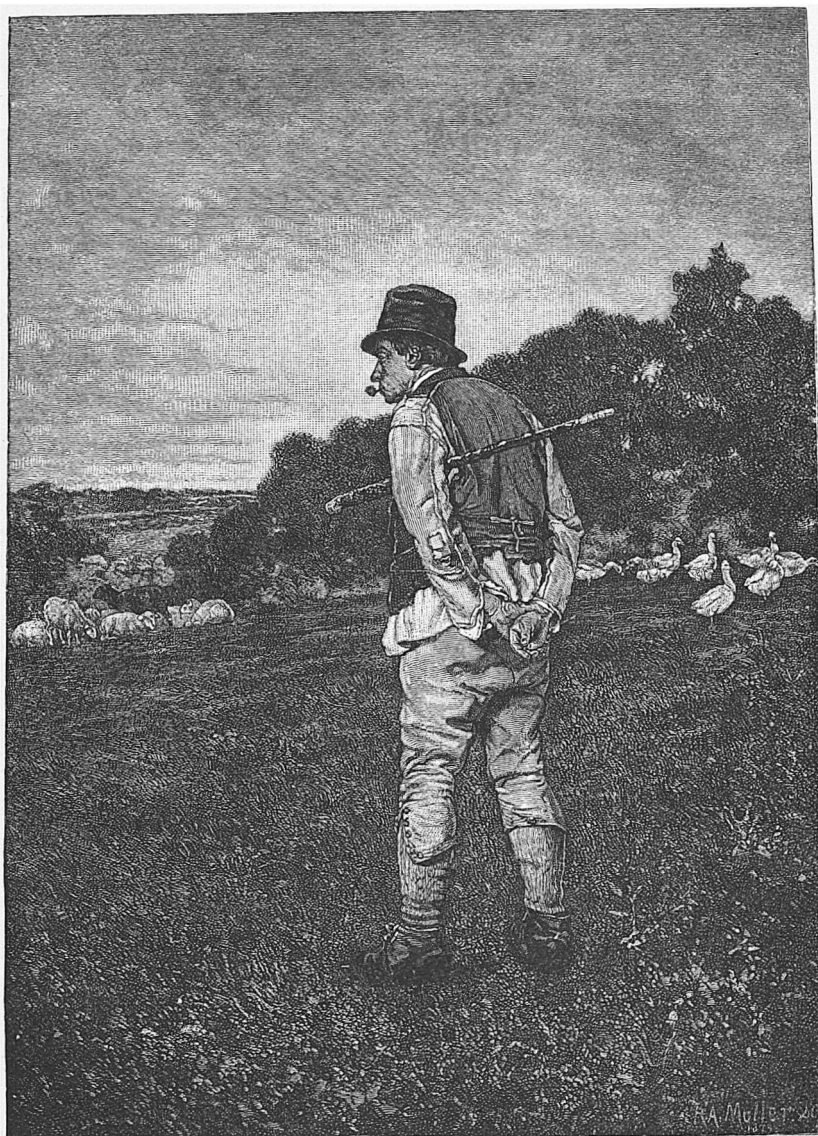
Has imitation of lithography become the *beau-ideal* of Mr. Müller? His *Banito and his Pet* (*St. Nicholas*, Vol. VI. p. 80), in the *Portfolio* as an example of his style, would seem to imply so much. "Drawn by Mary Hallock Foote": yet not a suspicion of her pencilling is there. Was it a rough sketch, reduced for the magazine, a loose vignette, and then squared out with a gray background of machine work? Her design is there, but nothing of her dainty hand-work. And yet the New School prides itself in exact reproduction of brush and trowel marks, and perfect imitation of artistic touch, from charcoal to pen and ink. Mr. Müller has done better things, already referred to. I notice this cut, not so much for rebuke of *his* apparent tendencies, as to point out what may fairly be expected under the present unintelligent régime. *On the Old Sod* (*Harper's Monthly*, October, 1879) will do more justice to Mr. Müller. But those lazy perpendiculars again! And in *A Sing on Monhegan Island* (p. 345, *Harper's Monthly* for July, 1880), why are the walls and ceiling plastered with cobwebs? Is it characteristic of the Maine islands?

I must hasten through my task of criticism. There is no use in multiplying instances. Mr. J. P. Davis, like Mr. Marsh, is one of the older men. But his style has changed with the times; or, rather, he has lost his earlier style through following the conceits of others. *Cradling*, Tiffany (*Scribner*, Vol. XIV. p. 529), and *Roxy*, Walter Shirlaw (Vol. XVI. p. 792), sufficiently indicate his recent work. *Mr. Charles Coghlan as Charles Surface*, Abbey (Vol. XVII. p. 777), may show how far he has wandered. One of his best landscapes will be found at page 420 of

the AMERICAN ART REVIEW. Color and general form seem excellently kept; but the foreground lines are meaningless, and I can see no reason for the complication of lines in the sky. The tone of the whole is, however, of admirable quality. One thing to be noticed in all this super-fine work is, that, however diverse the original genius of the men, when they are drilled into superfineness their work is scarcely distinguishable. This utter subordination of the engraver destroys his individuality. Having no individuality of his own, will he be better able to appreciate the individuality (the real personality, I do not say only the outer clothes) of the painter? J. H. Whitney does a perfect piece of patient facsimile in his cut of *Foe* (*Scribner*, Vol. XVIII. p. 491, and *Portfolio*). In endeavoring to reproduce *The Morning Stars*, after Blake's wonderful etching (*Scribner*, June, 1880, p. 237), he has simply attempted an impossibility. For his very failure, however, he deserves much credit. It is remark-

ably close to the original. The Haden etchings (*Scribner*, August, 1880) are failures altogether as representations of the larger etchings. They only give the subjects of the originals. I must point to one more example of the Microscopic,—Leblanc's reproduction of the frontispiece to George Cruikshank's *Table-Book* (*Scribner*, Vol. XVI. p. 172). If this sort of thing be—can it be?—carried further, Messrs. Harper and Scribner will have to atone by endowing a hospital for blind wood-engravers. And still another calls for notice,—Mr. Kilburn's *Sand Dunes* (*Scribner*, July, 1880, p. 365). I certainly do not give it as a sample of Mr. Kilburn's work, but as the crowning mercy of the "New School." I can best describe it as a *Fuengling by machinery*. May I hope that Mr. Kilburn has invented a machine for the saving of our threatened sight?

To what are we tending? I have carefully examined, I believe, everything that has been done by this new school, whose works both grace and, I think, disgrace the pages of our two most enterprising, most liberal, and most deservedly successful magazines. I think I have not been slow in recognizing talent, nor stingy in awarding praise. But how much of the talent is misapplied: for I can but call it misapplied when it is spent on endeavors to rival steel line-engraving or etching, in following brush-marks, in pretending to imitate crayon work, charcoal,



ON THE OLD SOD.

ENGRAVED BY R. A. MÜLLER, AFTER WILLIAM MAGRATH.

From "Art in America," by S. G. W. Benjamin. Published by Harper &amp; Brothers.



or lithography, and in striving who shall scratch the greatest number of lines on a given space, without thought of whether such multiplicity of line adds anything to the expression of the picture or the beauty of the engraving. Talent! there is no lack of it. My list of capable engravers has left out many, and I have but given a few samples of a vast amount of work. Possibly it will seem to some that they have been neglected, that such and such engravings at all events should have had honorable mention. So should it have been had there been no limit to my history. It had been a pleasure to have honored even the youngest of the rising men, to have done fuller justice to those known. After all, the melancholy reflection would have been but the more deeply impressed upon me,—How much of talent is here thrown away, how much of force that should have helped toward growth is wasted in this slave's play [call it gladiatorial, and own yourselves hired or condemned to do it], for a prize not worth having, the fame of having well done the lowest thing in an engraver's art, and having for that neglected the study of the highest! For it is the lowest and last thing about which an artist [and it is only to the artist-engraver that I care to appeal] should concern himself, this excessive fineness, this minuteness of work. It might have its worth, though there not so important as it seems, in the copying of old missals [see illustrations to *A Famous Breviary*, in *Harper's Monthly* for February, 1880]; at least it is not out of place in work such as that, better befitting the indolent hours of monks than the stirring lives of men who should be artists. I do not say there is no good in it. While acknowledging its cleverness, I recognize also something to be gained,—a niceness of hand that may be usefully employed. But in engraving, as in other branches of art, the first thing is drawing; the second, drawing; the third, drawing. Form, beauty of form, and place—perspective and distance: until you can express these, you have not even the beginnings of your art. When you have mastered these, and with many or few lines can make these understood, go on to differences of substance, and beauty and harmony even of lines. After which you may refine as much as pleases you, provided you do not destroy intelligibility or strength. I know no surer recipe for making good engravers. It is all drawing with the graver, or it is not engraving at all,—not worthy to be so called.

I am aware that there is another method,—the mechanical, the Chinese, the stencil-plate method. You can take your choice: either to trust to your own understanding, or to grow a pig-tail, and follow your "artist" blandly in Chinese fashion. The second may for a time be the more profitable, as well as the safer method, and will certainly be most pleasant to any number of young painters or designers of vagueness, your want of understanding dovetailing into and assisting theirs. I say this is the safer method; for an independent understanding, or say only a respectful endeavor to do something that may be understood, will possibly lead you astray. I have heard of an engraver, and one of fair age and reputation, who, striving to make something out of his painter's touches of white, engraved a stream with foam-edged waves; and lo! the artist intended it for a field of daisies. Over the just wrath of that artist, who might have prided himself on his botanical correctness, I draw a hasty veil; but the unhappy engraver—has gone about with a pig-tail ever since. The misadventure might fairly warn him off too conceited a dependence on himself; and yet I think his course of action, fail as it might in certain instances, was the right course after all. And he has found draughtsmen on the wood, and painters also, who thought his engraving better for his understanding of what they drew or painted, and who were not too arrogant to allow that he, better than they, might know the opportunities and limitations of his own art.

And here let me confess to my brothers in engraving afflictions, that, however hardly I may have dealt with them in these my criticisms, it has been, in the first place, not from desire to censure, but out of an earnest wish for their benefit and the improvement of our art; and, in the second place, I have borne in mind a saving clause. Not they, the engravers, have chosen to bow down to brush-marks, to blind themselves with what soon will be altogether unprintable

work; but it has been brought into vogue and forced upon them by ignorant reviewers, undersigning photographers, and the malice prepense of painters who, too idle or unable to draw upon the wood, have deceived unwitting publishers into the belief that they were inventing "a great invention." It will have its day, and then, with what we can save out of the failure, we shall return to the old traditions, not renouncing experiment, but also not abandoning or slighting the experience of some who have gone before.

I carefully review the works I have had before me for this history. I can find nothing so good [and let it be remarked that it was as fine as most of the fine work of to-day] as the *Jacob's Dream* engraved by Adams nearly half a century ago (see page 239). It is better than the best of all work since done, better than the best so much extolled at present: because he did not sacrifice everything to fineness, but cared first for the essentials of good drawing and lines with meaning, and finished only after laying the foundations.

I would not part from my readers without at least brief explanation of the course I have pursued in the foregoing History,—or shall I rather call it Preliminary Study of History as part-preparation for some completer volume. Concerning the earlier men I have had for almost all my material to depend upon personal recollections of men often strangers to me, to whose ready courtesy I here acknowledge my great obligations. Sometimes reports so collected have not agreed, and it has been difficult to judge between conflicting statements. I may not always have been correct in my judgment. I am hopeful, however, that it is only in minor and quite unimportant matters that I shall be found astray. There may be errors, too, in my writing of my contemporaries: some wrongful attribution of work; omissions also. But I may conscientiously affirm that I have rejected no information of any worth volunteered to me; and that I have sought for information wherever I had the slightest hope of reaching it,—in more and in stranger quarters than I can here afford space to give account of.

For my critical opinions I can truly say this: they have had no personal bias. Very often I have chosen the subject for comment, and written my criticism, before knowing who was the engraver. It was a secondary inquiry—second in time if not in importance—whose name I had to affix to it. If (I have already pleaded to the possibility) my remarks have sometimes seemed harsh or out of tune, I ask of the engraver who may read them to forgive any cause he may find for momentary wincing or disgust: bearing in mind his own regard for the healthy progress of our art, for which I confess myself very jealous. I have not written merely to supply a dry chronicle of the doings of American wood-engravers; I have written, in praise or blame as seemed just to me, distinctly from a desire to help the advance of wood-engraving in America. I trust the true lover of the art will generously pardon any short-comings and even some offences for the sake of our common object.

W. J. LINTON.

